

## THE NEBRASKA CHILDREN'S SUMMIT: THE BEGINNING SEPTEMBER 25-27, 2006

In September 2005, Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice John V. Hendry, the Director of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHSS), the Nebraska State Court Administrator, the Nebraska Court Improvement Project Director and others, attended a nationwide summit in Minnesota, entitled *Changing Lives By Changing Systems: National Judicial Leadership Summit for the Protection of Children*. The main objective of the leaders behind the nationwide summit was to encourage other states to improve court oversight of cases to reduce delays in order to ensure that children are placed safely and permanently in a timely manner.

At the nationwide summit, the Nebraska leaders, led by Chief Justice Hendry, created a Nebraska State Court Action Plan designed to address the objectives of the summit. The first goal was to induce statewide implementation of best court practices based on the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) Resource Guidelines. This goal would be accomplished through a statewide summit.

Chief Justice Hendry directed the development of the Nebraska Children's Summit to address the objectives of the nationwide summit: to improve the processing and outcomes of the child protection court system in Nebraska through the development of community teams of judges, social services administrators and workers, attorneys, court administrators, and other stakeholders. The objectives behind the Summit in Nebraska were to train participants on the Resource Guidelines and provide tools to develop collaborative teams and implement the Guidelines in their local communities while receiving statewide support and guidance.

The Summit was coordinated by the Nebraska Supreme Court and the Court Improvement Project at the Center on Children, Families and the Law, with the financial support of the State Justice Institute (SJI) and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services System.

The Nebraska Children's Summit was held on September 25-27, 2006, at the Lied Conference Center in Nebraska City, Nebraska. In attendance were several Nebraska leaders, including Chief Justice John Hendry, Chief Justice Designate Michael Heavican, Governor Dave Heineman, Attorney General Jon Bruning, HHSS Acting Director Chris Peterson, Nebraska State Court Administrator Janice Walker, and Nebraska Court Improvement Director Victoria Weisz, as well as over 200 stakeholders from every district in Nebraska, including:

- All judges with juvenile court jurisdiction
- HHSS Administrators, Supervisors and workers
- Parents' attorneys
- County Attorneys
- Guardians ad Litem (GALs)
- CASAs (Court Appointed Special Advocates)
- FCRB (Foster Care Review Board) members

The participants were able to listen to several national speakers, including Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Retired Kathleen Blatz, the Honorable William Byars, Director of South Carolina's Department of Juvenile Justice, the Honorable Stephen Rubin, immediate past president of NCJFCJ and lead judge of the Pima County Model Court, and the Honorable James Payne, Director of the Indiana Department of Child Services. There were also training sessions on family drug treatment courts, family group conferencing and mediation, and Title IV-E requirements. An overview of the Resource Guidelines was presented, and there were several sessions that addressed the best practices of specific court proceedings. At several points during the Summit, the local teams met to discuss implementation of the best practices of the Resource Guidelines in their jurisdiction.

On September 27, 2006, the participants of the Summit voted for the new name of this project: Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative.

At the conclusion of the Summit, Chief Justice Hendry directed the teams to return to their communities to develop their collaborative teams and begin implementing the best practices from the Resource Guidelines. Chief Justice Designate Michael Heavican echoed those sentiments and voiced his full support for the Initiative.

# ROLES OF KEY PLAYERS



**CHIEF JUSTICE**  
Michael Heavican

## CHIEF JUSTICE

The Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice is the overseer of the Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative. The Chief Justice will protect the vision of the Initiative and provide direction to its members to ensure that the goals and objectives continue to be pursued. On October 2, 2006, Michael Heavican took the oath of office to become the Nebraska Supreme Court's Chief Justice.

## PROJECT CHAIR

The project chair is a judge with juvenile court jurisdiction appointed by the Chief Justice. The project chair acts as primary advisor to the Chief Justice, and is the face of the Initiative to the public and other entities. The project chair is a consultant for local lead judges and teams, and will be the primary liaison with other organizations. Judge Lawrence Gendler has been appointed as project chair.

## LEAD JUDGE

Each local team has designated a lead judge. The lead judge leads local progress, and corresponds regularly with the project chair for support and consultation. Local lead judges will attend lead judges meetings on a bi-annual basis. The lead judges are the motivators for positive systems change from within their team and by their team members.

## TEAM SECRETARY

Each local team has designated a team secretary. The team secretary assists the lead judge in arranging meetings, preparing and distributing agendas, and keeping accurate minutes. The team secretary maintains active communication with all team members, and will provide written quarterly progress reports to state staff. The team secretary is in direct and regular correspondence with state staff, and relays all pertinent news and information to the team members.

## STAFF ATTORNEY

The staff attorney works with the project chair and local teams to offer technical assistance and information regarding the direction and parameters of the Initiative. The staff attorney is a resource liaison for team members and other stakeholders, and maintains regular contact with the local teams through the team secretary and lead judge. The staff attorney serves as a worker in the development of statewide projects, including orders and forms development, website construction and maintenance etc., maintains regular correspondence with the project chair and team secretaries, and is responsible for arranging statewide or regional meetings and conferences.



**PROJECT CHAIR**  
Lawrence Gendler

# LEADERS IN THE INITIATIVE

A principle tenet of the Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative is that Nebraska's judges must take an active leadership role in improving the court process in child protection cases. Judges have enormous respect from the community and court stakeholders, as well as great responsibility in the judicial system. Judges have the greatest ability to improve the lives of foster children through systems change and procedural improvements within their courts.

On September 20, 2006, the Nebraska Supreme Court appointed the Honorable Larry Gendler, a judge in the Separate Juvenile Court of Sarpy County, as Project Chair of the Initiative. In conjunction with Chief Justice Michael Heavican, Judge Gendler will lead the Initiative and maintain close ties with the lead judges.

The following judges have elected to be lead judges for their local teams:

Hon. Alan Brodbeck	8 <sup>th</sup> District – Holt County	Hon. Kurt Rager	6 <sup>th</sup> District – Dakota County
Hon. Carlton Clark	11 <sup>th</sup> District – Dawson County	Hon. Randin Roland	12 <sup>th</sup> District – Cheyenne County
Hon. Cloyd Clark	11 <sup>th</sup> District – Red Willow County	Hon. Gerald Rouse	5 <sup>th</sup> District – Seward County
Hon. Kent Florom	11 <sup>th</sup> District – Lincoln County	Hon. Patrick Runge	Winnebago Tribal Court
Hon. James Hansen	12 <sup>th</sup> District – Dawes County	Hon. August Schuman	8 <sup>th</sup> District – Rock County
Hon. Toni Thorson	3 <sup>rd</sup> District – Lancaster County	Hon. Edward Steenburg	11 <sup>th</sup> District – Keith County
Hon. Robert Ide	10 <sup>th</sup> District – Phelps County	Hon. John Steinheider	2 <sup>nd</sup> District – Otoe County
Hon. Gerald Jorgensen	9 <sup>th</sup> District – Buffalo County	Hon. Ross Stoffer	7 <sup>th</sup> District – Madison County
Hon. Philip Martin	9 <sup>th</sup> District – Hall County	Hon. Wadie Thomas	4 <sup>th</sup> District – Douglas County
Hon. Patrick McDermott	5 <sup>th</sup> District – Colfax County	Hon. Steven Timm	1 <sup>st</sup> District – Gage County
Hon. Robert O'Neal	2 <sup>nd</sup> District – Sarpy County	Hon. Kenneth Vampola	6 <sup>th</sup> District – Dodge County
Hon. Michael Offner	10 <sup>th</sup> District – Webster County	Hon. James Worden	12 <sup>th</sup> District – Scotts Bluff County
Hon. Jack Ott	10 <sup>th</sup> District – Adams County		

Please note that the counties listed above are the counties where the judge's primary seat is located. Many of these lead judges chair local teams that cover multiple counties.

The lead judges will meet bi-annually with the Project Chair to address the needs and concerns of the teams and the Initiative. The lead judges meetings will be chaired by the project chair, and will include a combination of training, discussion and planning. These meetings provide judges with the opportunity to share successes and challenges, to re-motivate the participants and to develop and identify statewide strategies for the Initiative.

The project chair also leads an advisory group that is comprised of ten individuals from a diversity of disciplines and regions across Nebraska. The purpose of the advisory group members will be to review materials, documents and policies drafted for use by local teams, and make recommendations to the project chair for improvement or changes.

The members of the advisory group are:

Lynette Boyle, GAL Attorney, Omaha  
Hon. Glenn Camener, Scottsbluff  
Mark Ells, Professor, Lincoln  
Marsha Fangmeyer, GAL and Parents Attorney, Kearney  
Hon. Robert Ide, Holdrege

Gerald Johnson, Parents Attorney, Plattsmouth  
Sandra Markley, County Attorney, Papillion  
Hon. Curtis Maschman, Falls City  
Hon. Patrick McDermott, Schuyler  
Bob Sparby, HHSS Administrator, Grand Island

# THE RESOURCE GUIDELINES

The *Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases* was published by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. It has become a national standard for best practices in abuse/neglect court proceedings. The Resource Guidelines are the product of years of study of multiple court systems and observations and advice from experienced system stakeholders.

The Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative has created a *County and Juvenile Court Practice Guide*, which translates the best practices contained in the Resource Guidelines to a grid-like framework for local teams. The local teams will use the Practice Guide in developing their Action Plan, which is a compilation of best practices the team intends to focus on adopting in the upcoming year.

The best practices contained in the Resource Guidelines will also provide the basis for county and district-wide assessments to be conducted across Nebraska. The purpose of these assessments will be to measure the degree of adherence to the best practices by locality.

## STATEWIDE ACTION

The Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative is guided on the state level by the Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice, the project chair, and the local lead judges. Although the main structure is a network of local teams working to introduce best practices into their local court systems, the Initiative also has a state-level structure that assists the local teams in their implementation of best practices and maintains a consistent and productive system of collaboration. At the behest of the Chief Justice and project chair, state staff provide technical assistance to the local groups, develop resources for the local teams (which will include, *inter alia*, an interactive website, resource manuals, and template order forms), and work on a statewide basis to address concerns within the child protection court system.

The lead judges will meet on a bi-annual basis with the project chair and state staff to address needs and concerns. The Initiative will also host annual regional conferences in which team members will discuss problems and successes of their local teams, receive training, and address statewide plans for improvement and better collaboration. The regional conferences will be open to all team members within that region, and its multi-disciplinary training will be specific to that region's needs.

Statewide performance measure assessments will also be commenced to evaluate a region's compliance with the best practices contained in the Resource Guidelines.

## LOCAL TEAMS



There are approximately 30 local teams across Nebraska. Each team has been formed on its own initiative and has invited stakeholders of its choosing to join the team. All teams consist of a lead judge, team secretary, and stakeholders from across the abuse/neglect court system who work well in a collaborative and can produce change in the system, which may include attorneys, social workers, guardians ad litem, school representatives, mediators, mental health and chemical dependency workers, tribal representatives, foster parents, former foster youth, CASAs, FCRB members, and community representatives.

Each local team has adopted an Action Plan, which will be updated yearly in accordance with their progress. An Action Plan is a compilation of best practices from the Practice Guide that the team intends to adopt or fully comply with in the upcoming year. The number of items in the Action Plan varies considerably among the teams.

To accomplish the goals in the Action Plan, the teams meet monthly. The team secretary distributes the agenda prior to the meeting to allow the members an opportunity to prepare for the meeting, and drafts minutes after the meeting. The Action Plan will be updated yearly in accordance with the team's progress in satisfying the terms of their Action Plan, and the local teams will submit Quarterly Progress Reports as a way to measure and analyze their continuing progress.

In addition to their collaboration as a local team, the teams will also collaborate with state staff and other local teams statewide. This will be accomplished through the sharing of successes and problems at yearly regional conferences, lead judges meetings and through contact with the project chair and team secretary. Through the efforts of local teams, the Nebraska abuse/neglect court system can consistently improve their outcomes and ensure quicker permanency and safety for the children it serves.